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Fri Mar 23 12:47:40 1990

REFLECTIONS ON 'OLD GUARD' PAGANISM

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Origin: The MAGICK LANTERN BBS
Kansas City, MO
816/531-7265

'Old Guard Paganism'. The phrase started out as a joke, but then caught on.
This tells us something. It tells us there is a NEED for such a term. It also implies its own antithesis, 'New Guard Paganism'. And it indicates that there is some difference between the two -- a 'difference that makes a
difference' -- and thus requires differentiating labels. (It should perhaps
be noted that the word 'Paganism' is used in the present context -- however
inaccurately -- to refer to modern Neo-Pagan Witchcraft , or Wicca. With grave misgivings, I have adopted this usage here.)

The first time I heard the phrase 'Old Guard Pagan' (used as a pejorative, as I remember) was during the organizing of the first Heartland Pagan Festival. It seems that the festival was being organized mainly by 'New Guard Pagans' who felt they were not getting the anticipated support from the 'Old Guard'. Yet, even after such misunderstandings were cleared up, the phrase remained. Why? And what is the line of demarcation?
I remember a discussion I had at the time with a long-time High Priestess and friend, in which we laughingly concluded that an Old Guard Pagan was any
'pre-Starhawk' Pagan. (Starhawk's important book, 'The Spiral Dance' was first published in 1979.) Th us, an Old Guard Pagan is any pre- 1979 Pagan.
And yet, seniority alone couldn't BE the difference -- although it might ACCOUNT for many differences. (It is interesting to note that Starhawk's book is responsible for a massive influx of people into femin ist traditions
of Wicca, and this shift in focus may likewise account for key differences.)

I suppose it's time for a bit of a disclaimer on my part. By the preceding
definition, I myself am an Old Guard Pagan, having become a Witch in 1970.

Thus, my views may be consequently biased toward the Old Guard. Still, I don't intend for this essay t o degenerate into shaking my cane at novices and using words like 'whipper-snapper' and 'scalliwag'. On the contrary, I enjoy working with novices and have taught a beginner's Witchcraft course for the past 18 years. No, my real goal here is to examine what I believe to be real and profound differences in attitudes concerning certain key issues between the two groups. Hopefully, this will lead to greater understanding and tollerance on the part of both.

In the following passages, I've tried to distill the differences between Old and New Guard Paganism, presenting them as strict dichotomies. However, bear in mind the vagaries that must accompany all such generalizations and the exceptions that will inevit ably be cited.

FEW VS. MANY: Even today, with a substantial Pagan community for support, a newcomer often feels insecure, frightened, and alone when rejecting the religious training of childhood in favor of Paganism. Imagine then, how much more insecure, frightened and alone an Old Guard Pagan would have felt, with literally no one to support such a decission. In fact, no one to talk to at all. When I first became a Witch, I knew of no other Witches anywhere. For all I knew, I was the first human being in centuries to make such a conscious choice. And this, I found, was typical of most Old Guard Pagans.

RESISTANCE VS. ACCEPTANCE: Naturally, only those of extraordinary courage and perception would make such a choice back then. Not only because they assumed they were choosing a solitary path, but also because they were sure to encounter active resistance -- if not outright hostility. Today, of course, Witches have appeared on Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo Rivera, and other national TV and radio shows, and the general populace is becoming more educated and, if not totally accepting, at least more tolerant.

SECRECY VS. OPENNESS: But before such positive media PR, most Old Guard Pagans learned quickly to 'keep themselves to themselves'. Usually, there was no one to talk with anyway, and when there was, it was someone trying to dissuade you from your choice. Thus, most Old Guard Pagans are more inclined to secrecy concerning their involvement than New Guard Pagans.

INACCESSABLE VS. ACCESSABLE INFORMATION: For Old Guard Pagans, information was hard won indeed. There were no Starhawks or Margot Adler's back then -- no one to neatly organize and systemitize the beliefs of Pagans. There were

instead books by Sybil Lee k, Paul Huson, Leo Martello, and Lady Sheba (at best), and books by Hans Holzer and Louise Huebner (at worst). And there were the historical tomes of Murray, Thorndike, Robbins, and others, as well as the disorganized 'linking' work of Gardner, Leland, a nd a few more. And there was no one to tell you which book was worthwhile and which wasn't -- so you read them ALL! Typically, an Old Guard Pagan has read (and owns!) a small library of books on Paganism. And, back then, if you HADN'T read the classics (like Murray and Gardner) then you weren't taken very seriously by other Pagans. By contrast, many New Guard Pagans feel that reading one or two books (usually Adler and Starhawk) is quite sufficient. One unfortunate result is that Adler's or Starhawk' s version of Paganism is taken as the 'standard' by the New Guard, which is far from the case.